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LETTER DATED 8 APRIL 1999 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF AUSTRIA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

I have the honour to refer to the Conference on Peace and Tolerance in Kosovo, which was hosted by the Austrian Government in Vienna on 17 and 18 March 1999. The Conference brought together representatives from all major religions in Kosovo to discuss the current crisis in the region. The Vienna Declaration on Peace and Tolerance in Kosovo is the outcome of this dialogue (see annex).

It would be highly appreciated if you would arrange for the present letter and its annex to be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Ernst SUCHARIPA
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Austria
to the United Nations

Annex

Vienna Declaration on Peace and Tolerance in Kosovo*

We, the representatives of the Catholic, Islamic and Orthodox communities who have lived in Kosovo for centuries, wish to express our sincere thanks to the Appeal of Conscience Foundation for bringing us together for this unique and important opportunity to deliberate with one another concerning the fates of our peoples. We also wish to thank our generous Austrian hosts for bringing us together in this land of peace and tranquillity so that we could have thoughtful and fruitful discussions. We are grateful for the personal participation and support of the President of Austria, Thomas Klestil, Chancellor Viktor Klima, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Vice Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, and the encouragement of the President of the United States of America, Bill Clinton, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, His Holiness Pope John Paul II, the President of the European Community, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Gerhard Schröder, the Secretary-General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Azedin Laraki, His All Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, His Holiness Patriarch Aleksy II of Moscow and All Russia, the World Council of Churches and many others.

Further, we pray that the efforts in Paris concerning Kosovo will achieve the peace we are all seeking.

Our delegations have come to Vienna from a troubled region, one that has seen much bloodshed and injustice, and we, the emissaries of our faithful, wish to state unequivocally that the war that is now raging in our homeland, where our people are being killed and maimed, and where our homes and places of worship, and our schools and monuments are barbarously being destroyed, is not a war of religions. We state categorically that we are against the killing and destruction and that we stand for dialogue and negotiation to bring about the peace that God demands of us.

We are proud of our homeland and are tied to it by bonds that reach deep into past generations. We want to bequeath that legacy of pride in Kosovo to future generations. We also know only too well our troubled and tragic history. A history that has all too often pitted differing ethnic and religious communities against each other. We know that past conflicts have left deep scars, have caused unspeakable suffering and have brought forth veritable rivers of blood and tears. We cannot ignore those deep wounds and must grieve for those who have suffered.

Without forgetting our sorrows, however, we want to emphasize to our faithful and to all others in Kosovo that history is recounting the past. No one can change the immutable past. But the future is within our power to influence and direct. In the name of our faithful, we can demand an end to the suffering that has plagued our peoples for so long and call on all to look forward, to change the present era of confrontation to one of cooperation. We,

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* The Albanian and Serbian texts are translations of the original

therefore, enjoin all who are wrongly fuelling the fires of the bloody conflict now raging in our homeland to stop the killing and destruction and join us in the search for peace through discussions and negotiations.

Although our faiths differ, we maintain that human life is of ultimate value. We all serve God and abide by the commandments he has given us to follow. Therefore, we firmly denounce the killing and all acts of violence. We urge our faithful to solve their disagreements peacefully with those of other religions or ethnic backgrounds, as we have done during our discussions here and in the publication of this declaration.

We pledge that we will bring this message of cooperation home to our faithful, that we will distribute it within our communities, and that we will urge all to lay aside their weapons. Only then, when the weapons are silent and all religious and ethnic communities have the right to express their views through open and free discussions, can we achieve understanding, tolerance and cooperation and find equitable solutions to our differences.

It is with this in mind that we, the representatives of the Catholic, Islamic and Orthodox faiths in Kosovo, lay down these precepts:

1. Stop the killing and all acts of violence.

2. We call for a verbal ceasefire to end the polemics of hate and remind all of the words from Proverbs, "Life and death are in the power of the tongue".

3. In cooperation with the Appeal of Conscience Foundation, establish an ongoing interreligious "Conscience Contact Group" to continue the work begun by this Conference and to help advance the principle of "live and let live".

4. Allow all in Kosovo to live in peace, safety and freedom.

5. Insure safe and unimpeded travel in all areas of Kosovo.

6. Permit all in Kosovo to live, worship and work in the knowledge that their basic human and religious rights will not be violated.

7. Preserve and protect houses of worship, as well as religious and cultural monuments of all faiths.

8. Permit all ethnic and religious communities to retain their cultural and linguistic heritage and to freely allow those communities to provide education that will perpetuate that heritage.

9. Establish a viable system in Kosovo, one that reflects the wishes of those who live there without violating the rights of any minority.

10. We demand that all assistance from international humanitarian organizations to those in need in Kosovo be transmitted without hindrance and delay.

We, the undersigned, believe that it is our duty to God and to our faithful to state categorically that all must accept the way of non-violence and cooperation. Only then will there be an end to the killing and to the destruction of our homes and places of worship. We, therefore, demand of those who have resorted to misguided violent means to achieve their goals, to lay aside their arms, to withdraw their engines of terrible destruction, and to seize the initiative we offer from our hearts - cooperation and peace - to bring about a better and more fruitful life for all in Kosovo today, and for all those who will follow.

Vienna, Austria

18 March 1999

(Signed) Rabbi Arthur SCHNEIER
President
Appeal of Conscience Foundation

(Signed) His Eminence Reverend Marko SOPI
Catholic Bishop Kosovo

(Signed) His Eminence Kyr ARTEMIJE
Bishop of Raz Prizren, Kosovo
The Holy Synod of the Serbian
Orthodox Church

(Signed) Professor Quemal MORINA
Vice Dean, Faculty of Islamic Studies
Pristina, Kosovo

(Signed) His Excellency Viktor KLIMA
Federal Chancellor of Austria
Witness